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BELFAST MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

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COMMUNICATIONS, ORIGINAL AND SELECTED.

To the Proprietors of the Belfast Magazine.

GENTLEMEN,

THE enclosed remarks, the fruits of actual observation, or of good information, are respectfully submitted to your consideration and approbation, from one who wishes well to your spirited and useful undertaking.

A DESCRIPTION OF STRABANE.

"Patria infelici fidelis."

I HAVE been pleased to see, in your useful publication, several attempts at the descriptive, giving accounts of certain portions of the neighbouring country. Although these descriptions have neither the lively and elegant spirit of a Moore, nor the deep erudition and profound philosophical remarks of a Gibbon, yet they bespeak a growing desire to cultivate and improve in laudable efforts, to communicate useful information in the department of local topography. I wish you, Messrs. Editors, to encourage this sort of writing, but upon a more enlarged and liberal system; besides counting the trees in a field, or the houses in a village, let them give us "a sketch of men and manners," something like "a view of society," describing the difference between the *animal* and the *vegetable* creation. It would be right, Gentlemen, if your Correspondents would cast their eyes on the plans followed with such eminent success by our more fortunate, because more favoured neighbours, in Britain, particularly by Sir John Sinclair, in his Statistical Accounts of the Parishes, of Scotland. You must know, that accurate and authentic descriptions of particular portions, are the best foundation for a true and useful history of a whole country.

I remember an attempt was made some years ago, by a respectable publisher, in a northern county, to encourage histories of the several parishes in his vicinity; but it was soon *hinted*

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to him, from authority, that the political and religious state of Ireland was such, as to forbid any reference either to its ancient or its modern condition. Our country must, indeed, be unfortunate, if we be debarred not only from describing former transactions, but must also throw a veil over our present situation. Must all means of improvement be prevented? Must our hopes be deadened, of one day becoming equal to our jealous sister (or, as some call her, our envious step-mother) in science, in civilization, in wealth and respectability?

Without presuming to draw aside the mysterious veil thrown over the history of past times, permit me to send you a few local observations on a part of the country not yet noticed in your Magazine; observations which have occurred to me during a few days' residence in the town of Strabane and its neighbourhood. But I give them to you only as broken and detached hints, hoping that some more able and experienced writer may improve upon them,* and produce a more scientific and extended view, both of *men* and *manners* in this part of Ireland.

Strabane is pleasantly situated on the eastern side of the Mourne, extending about a mile on the banks of that river, and may contain between four and five thousand inhabitants. Before the union it sent two members to the *Irish* parliament, being a borough, under the influence of the Marquis of Abercorn. It has one church of the Established religion, one Dissenting meeting-house, a small congregation of Methodists, and a large congregation of Catholics. The manners of the people of this place are in general of a sober and industrious cast, being nearly all of them either merchants or shop-keepers, or employed in the linen-trade; with a number

* Describing *men* as he *is*, "catching the living *manners* as they *are*,"
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of the lower orders of mechanics and labourers; having little time for idling and studying fashions, they are pestered with but few of those *nothing-to-do gentlemen*, who infest larger and wealthier communities. Strabane cannot boast of many internal beauties, either as to houses or streets; if the original planners, or settlers, had reserved a wide vacancy, properly embanked towards the river, it had materially contributed to the beauty of the town, and the health and convenience of the inhabitants; as it is, the range of building brought close upon the water, disfigures the town, and renders the houses on that side extremely damp and unwholesome, as the river is subject to frequent and sudden floods, particularly at the lower end, towards Lifford.

A wide and deep canal has lately been cut, from opposite to Port-hall, about four miles distant, up to the northern side of the town, which very much facilitates the navigation of merchandise and heavy articles from Derry, the landing port. The Marquis of Abercorn, it is said, means to encourage the building of a new town at the hason of the canal, in order to increase the value and consequence of his property in that direction. A very respectable bridge of nine arches, across the Mourne, connects the town with the fertile and populous parish of Urney, and from which a road leads towards Castlefin, Ballybofey, Ballyshannon, &c. There is another bridge of nearly equal dimensions cast over the Foyle, at Lifford, the county town of Donegall, where the Mourne and the Finn form a conjunction, these rivers now make a very considerable body of water, a broad and rapid stream, influenced by the tide, which passing under the fine bridge of Derry, twelve miles from Strabane, falls into the noble estuary of Lough Foyle, dividing the counties of Derry and Donegall, and is finally lost in the Atlantic Ocean.

The best view of the country is from the summit of Knockivo, a mountain that rises immediately behind Strabane, and may be more than two thousand feet above the level of the river. From this lofty and commanding site there is a very extended prospect, at least

thirty miles distant in some parts of the circle, which is circumscribed by one continued range of mountains, rising in the counties of Derry, Donegall and Tyrone. In front, to the westward, is seen the famous gap of Barnesmore; to the N. W. the celebrated *Muckish** rears its huge back above all the other mountains, something resembling in shape an immense turf stack. Below, the country appears like a map presenting a great scope of cultivation, with the rivers Mourne, and Finn, and Foyle, meandering their divers course towards the sea. There is an abundance of hills and vallies, and waters to enrich the prospect, but it is miserably deficient in wood, owing, it is alleged, to the short and uncertain leases granted to the occupiers.

There are several towns of some consequence in the neighbourhood of Strabane. Newtown Stewart, a thriving place, about seven miles to the S.E. lying on the great road to Dublin. Castlefin, five miles to the westward, on the banks of the Finn. Raphoe, also five miles to the N.W. and Lifford, seated at the foot of Crochan-hill, only one mile in the same direction. The latter places are within sight of Strabane, and contribute to the diversity of the scenery.

I know of no gentlemen's seats in this part of the country, worthy of particular notice. Every thing in that way sinks in comparison with Lord Belmore's splendid mansion, near Enniskillen. Lord Mountjoy has a noble domain (the work of his respectable father) beyond Newtown Stewart, but the house is little better than a large cottage. Baron's-court, the seat of the Marquis of Abercorn, lying at the foot of the mountain called Bessy Bell, is entirely unworthy of a nobleman possessed of so princely a fortune; his domain is beautified by a fine piece of water, surrounded by an extensive wood, but the whole is so much sunk in a bottom, as scarcely to be seen until you are in it. The Rev. Mr. Fowler has a small neat improvement, on the banks of the Finn, but the house has nothing to recommend

* This mountain produces that peculiar kind of sand, so useful in the making of fine glass, &c.

it for any sort of beauty. Nor does the palace of the bishop of Raphoe deserve so dignified a title, unless it be necessary, contrary to the fashion of the apostolic age, that a modern bishop can live no where but in a house called a palace.

By the bye, your orthodox readers will be pleased to hear that the higher clergy (those of the establishment I mean) are handsomely provided for in these parts.* The bishoprick of Raphoe, is now worth above 6000*l.* and will soon amount to 10,000*l.* a year. The bishoprick of Derry is now worth 14,000*l.* and will soon rise to 20,000*l.* a year. Little did the fishermen of Galilee imagine, that any of their successors would receive such capital wages! They did not think of palaces and coaches, and such like grandeur. Simple souls, they only thought of preaching the gospel!

Among the great land-holders in this part of the country, I heard mentioned the Marquis of Abercorn, Lord Mountjoy and Lord Erne; but the first is by far the most considerable, both as to the extent and the value of property. His lordship's estate reaches from Baron's-court (the place of his occasional residence, about three miles beyond Newtown Stewart) on both sides of the river, with few intervals, all the way to the liberties of Derry. This extensive property puts it in his lordship's power to be the benefactor or the oppressor of a numerous tenantry. Providence has been pleased to place this nobleman on a high station in society, and to give him vast influence, either as to the happiness or misery of thousands of his fellow mortals. No doubt, his lordship has wisdom to discern, and magnanimity to pursue a liberal system of conduct. *Parcere subjectis.* By condescending to promote the

comfort and happiness of his tenantry, he will secure to himself their veneration and gratitude. Descended from a long line of illustrious ancestors, his noble mind will always recollect, that *virtus est sola nobilitas*.

Upon inquiring into the conduct of the principal landlords hereabouts, I found a wide difference of character. I was told of one, who expressed a wish, "that every one of his tenants should be able to afford him a good piece of beef and a fat hen, whenever he should choose to dine with any of them." Of another, who by his short tenures and high rents, seemed determined to leave his screwed-up dependants scarcely any thing to eat above potatoes and herrings.

I wish, Messrs. Editors, that some of your able writers would give us a solemn warning-piece on this most interesting subject, showing the mistaken, the dangerous policy of land-holders, squeezing their tenantry of their last shilling. God knows, there are already too many causes of discontent in this unhappy country. Impress upon their minds, I beseech ye, the necessity of union and concord amongst every class of the people. These are critical and alarming times. The great destroyer, or the great reformer (call him what you please) is abroad in the world; and we know, if the people, I mean, the men, of Spain, of Italy, or of Germany, had been contented and united, that *Bonaparte* had not now been the conqueror of Europe. It would be wise, methinks, in our rulers and great men, not to force their subjects, or tenants, to wish for new masters, and to say, or even to think, "come what may, we may be bettered by a change, for we cannot be worse."

The inhabitants of Strabane spoke favourably of their chief magistrate, the Rev. Stewart Hamilton, rector of the parish of Camus. Whilst this gentleman is unremitting in the execution of his public duty, he is uniform in a kind and affable behaviour to all his fellow citizens. This is a proof, if proofs were wanting, that men in office, or high stations, when they conduct themselves with a due degree of condescension and humanity, will assuredly attain and

*I learned that the lower orders of the clergy are also well provided for in the diocese of Derry. Many of the parishes yielding from 600*l.* to 2000*l.* a year. The income of the rector of Donaghmore is 3000*l.* per annum. It is pleasant to observe, that the value of tythes, much to the emolument of the clergy, and the edification of their hearers, increases as rapidly as any other article of landed produce.

enjoy both public favour and private esteem.

As to myself, during my short stay among them, I must speak of the inhabitants of Strabane, with respect and gratitude for their kindness and hospitality; not but I perceived symptoms of pride and superciliousness in some corners of the town. The truth is, Strabane, Derry and Belfast have their *quality*, who presume to turn up their noses at their honest and more industrious neighbours. In these places it is the constant struggle of the *plebeians* to get up, and of the *patricians* (except upon electioneering occasions) to keep them down, which is the continual source of foolish bickerings, and silly heart-burnings. Perhaps, on a future occasion, I may furnish you with some laughable instances of most ridiculous warfare, of petty pride on one side, and of petty ambition on the other. The would-be gentry will appear the more ridiculous, when it is known, that many of their fathers, and some of themselves, but lately emerged from the lowest trades and occupations; but, as in Queen Bess' days, "the peasant's toe treads on the gentleman's heel." The people of Strabane, however, I observed, wisely avoid these nonsensical contentions, and maintain among themselves, a cheerful and well-regulated society, leaving the feeble and antiquated *nobility* of the square to dose over their vain and imaginary consequence.

I had almost forgotten to have informed you, that about half way up the mountain of Knockivo, commences a deep and narrow chasm, or dell, called the Glen; it sketches downwards about a mile, until it terminates on the road to Derry. This is certainly a very romantic spot of the kind, full of lofty rocks and gloomy precipices, fringed with various kinds of trees and ever-greens; at the bottom runs a purling stream, its limpid waters gurgling and groping their way amongst innumerable bushes and wild flowers. It is a scene such as may be seen in some parts of Wales, and the county of Wicklow. It has a solitary and fairy-like appearance, and is well calculated for the fanciful dreams either of despairing

or successful *lovers*. Some years ago, the noble proprietor built a handsome cottage, entirely in the rural style; and here, and hereabouts of a summer's evening, were seen various groups of both sexes, "listening to the voice of love,"* and enjoying the delight of the romantic scenery. Doubtless it was a very convenient rendezvous for the frolickings of boys and girls, where, amidst the murmuring of brooks and the melody of birds, there seemed to be "a Cupid in every rose-bud, and a Venus in every myrtle;" nay, it is even said, that certain of the reverend grey-beards from town, would, now and then, get a little mellow here, with too frequent potations of clear *Glenmornin*, or pure *Inishowen*. My Lord, the Marquis, who is himself extremely attentive to the laws of society, particularly in whatever relates to the intercourse of the sexes, demolished the building, and removed every atom of its materials, hereby evincing a most commendable care of the morals of his tenantry, and paternally anxious that they should not transgress the bounds of decorum, either in love or whiskey.

Strabane is situated in a thickly inhabited country. When the linen manufacture was in its prime, with spinning, and weaving, and farming, the people had sufficient employment; but since the decline of that business, many of them have been thrown idle. In Britain, they have such a variety of branches of trade, that when one fails, they can betake themselves to another. In this part of the country, the inhabitants have only one resource; when that sinks, all is a blank with them. If to make a people industrious and useful, be the duty of the rulers of a nation, what sort of rulers has *this* nation had for the last hundred years? But if Ireland is intended only as a nursery for the army, then we have had the wisest governors that ever ruled a nation. Accordingly, vast numbers of the young men enter into the army; and every family here has either a father, a son, a brother, or a nephew, learning the noble art of

* "In pleasing error lost, and charmingly deceived."

killing, instead of driving the plough or the shuttle. The bones of many hundreds of Irish weavers lie bleaching in the arid plains of Spain, or are rotting in the stagnant marshes of Walcheren. But the old men and women who cannot conveniently go a soldiering, being left behind, they and their children, in numerous and successive troops, covered with rags and vermin, incessantly importune every passenger, and besiege every door and window, with piteous moans and supplications, petitioning for succour and support. The vast number of beggars, of all ages and sexes, and the frightful appearance of their cabins, or hovels, strike every feeling mind with pity and horror. Surely, if the great people at St. James' could have but one view of these miserable creatures, their royal breasts would be touched by compassion, and they would exert their royal wisdom to relieve their wretched subjects in Ireland.

Every sincere well-wisher to his country, in the province of Ulster, venerates the names of HENRY and ROBERT JOY, the founders of much of the wealth and prosperity of Belfast. They sowed their seed in a good soil, and it has yielded an abundant crop. In the eye of virtue and true religion, how vastly superior are these men to those great statesmen and warriors, who busy themselves in planning the misery and destruction of the human race! Such a man was WILLIAM ROSS, of Strabane, who, alone and unsupported, by an almost unexampled zeal and perseverance, introduced and conducted the cotton manufacture amongst his townsmen, and gave bread and employment to numbers of men, women, and children; but death deprived the community of his public-spirited exertions; with him, the manufacture sunk, and there is scarcely a wreck of it left behind. No monumental column rises to adorn the grave of this most excellent man, but he lives in the esteem and respect of his fellow-citizens; and this tribute to his memory, the spontaneous offering of a passing traveller, will, I hope, be recorded and perpetuated in the Belfast Magazine.

VIATOR.

Coleraine, Oct. 1809.

To the Editor of the Belfast Magazine.

THE CONSTANT SOLDIER.

THE seeds of the social virtues are inherent in the breasts of our countrymen; and though they are deemed the indefeasible inheritors of ignorance, nature has endued them with virtuous affections, so bounteously, that the conduct of our peasantry, in many respects, is capable of awakening to a consciousness of inferiority, and a sense of shame, the more polished and enlightened classes of mankind. To illustrate this position, I beg leave to recite the following *true story*, which came under my observation, some months past, and, which, if it is not inconsistent with the plan of your miscellany, you will oblige me by inserting.

I was walking between Ballymena and Ahoghill, and happened to overtake a middle-aged man, in whose countenance, Lavater would have discovered the hero and the philosopher, although the changes of climate, and the hardships he had undergone, had given an austerity to a face, which had once been engaging: I found strongly inclined to enter into discourse with him, as follows: I presume you have travelled far, friend, said I, as you appear much fatigued? "Yes, master," said he (turning on me an eye, beaming benevolence) "I have, indeed, travelled far, but my present journey seems the most momentous of my life, and my mind is employed in expectation, even against hope—yet a few days, and I shall know if I am to wear out the remainder of my life in happiness or in misery." "You are going for a legacy, perhaps," rejoined I, "and are afraid of the many quirks and devices which;

Base, insidious men
Have gumbrous added to perplex the truth,
And lengthen simple justice into trade."

"No," said he, "I should never suffer money, to excite the passions by which I am agitated; but, as you seem interested in my story, I will tell it you."

"I was bred in the county Waterford, and at the age of eighteen I